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ABSTRACT

The New York City public school system has built partnerships with other early childhood programs in the community to make universal prekindergarten (UPK) available in settings appropriate for young children and affording full-day options to working families. In the first city-wide effort to obtain parent feedback on the program's success, over 7,500 parents of the 34,000 families with children enrolled in the program in 2000-2001 shared their first-hand experiences of the program in response to a questionnaire distributed to schools and community-based organizations offering UPK services. Findings revealed that 99 percent of respondents felt the program would prepare their children for kindergarten; 96 percent described the enrollment process as "easy"; 99 percent said they felt welcomed by program staff; and 99 percent said they would recommend the program to other parents. Eighty-five percent of parents enrolled their children in the UPK program because they wanted to expose them to the educational enrichment offered by the program. Local school referrals, parent referrals, and word of mouth all played a key role in parents' discovery of the program. Most parents had access to only half-day care, with 94 percent of children in extended day programs served by community-based organizations. Suggestions for program improvement included offering more extended-day options, extending the program to more children, placing more focus on academics, and expanding bilingual services. (The parent questionnaire is appended.) (KB)

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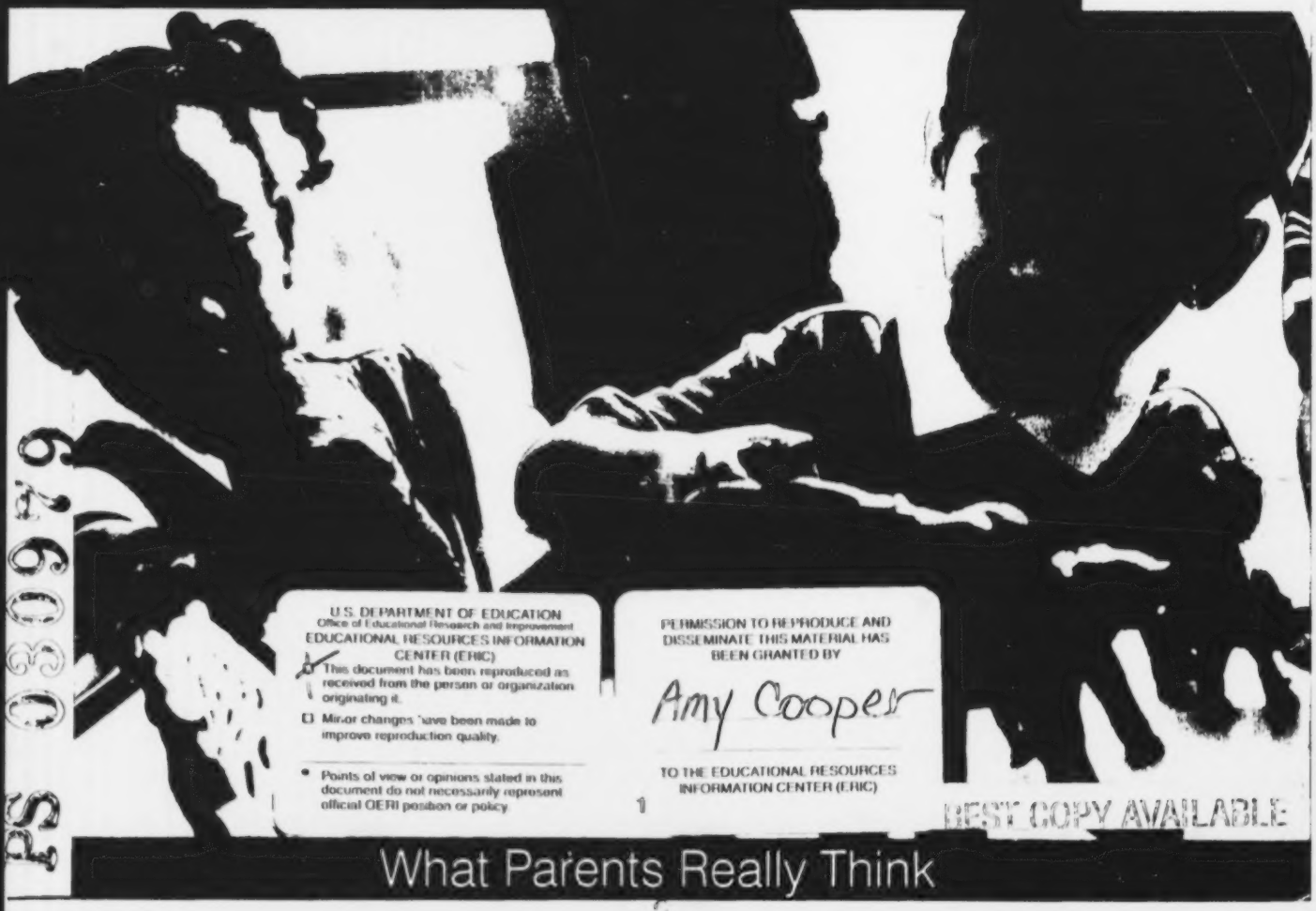
A Parent Report Card:

Universal Prekindergarten in New York City



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What Parents Really Think

Acknowledgements

This report was prepared by the Early Childhood Strategic Group (ECSG) with the support of the Center for Early Care and Education (CECE). Both organizations seek to ensure that the Universal Prekindergarten program is made available to every child in New York State. The ECSG, a working partnership of more than 20 organizations and individuals, has actively supported the implementation of Universal Prekindergarten programs in New York City, and has provided leadership in building new partnerships between the public education system and other early childhood services in the community. The Center for Early Care and Education, a partnership of Child Care, Inc. and the Schuyler Center for Analysis and Advocacy, has worked to accomplish the same goals throughout the state. The ECSG and CECE also work with the Emergency Coalition to Save Universal Prekindergarten and with the Alliance for Quality Education to advocate for full funding of this essential program. For contact information for both the ECSG and the Center, please refer to the back cover of this report.

We wish to thank Dr. Wanda Roundtree, who conceptualized the report's framework and edited the final product, and Charles Paprocki, who coordinated the work of the Early Childhood Strategic Group and managed the survey process. We are grateful to Eleanor Greig Ukoli, Director of the Office of Early Childhood Education at the New York City public schools, and to her staff; to the city's Community School Districts for distributing and collating the questionnaire; and to the Universal Prekindergarten teachers whose efforts are described in this report. We also thank the UPK Advisory Board and staff of the Early Childhood Education Office in Community School District 11, who developed and piloted the questionnaire used here.

The ECSG extends a special thanks to our funders at the Child Care and Early Education Fund, the United Way Targeted Needs Fund, the Fund for the City of New York, and the Altman Foundation, who have continued to steadfastly support the work of the ECSG and the development of the Resource Center, and to the Trust for Early Education for their support of the Center for Early Care and Education.

Above all we wish to thank the parents of Universal Prekindergarten children, who so freely shared their perceptions with us. This report demonstrates beyond a shadow of a doubt that parents overwhelmingly support this vital early education program.

Nancy Kolben
Early Childhood Strategic Group & Center for Early Care and Education

A Parent Report Card:

Universal Prekindergarten in New York City

What Parents Really Think

by Amy Cooper & Kenea Letts

Early Childhood Strategic Group Resource Center

Center for Early Care and Education

Fall 2002

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Table of Contents

2 Executive Summary

4 Universal Prekindergarten in New York City

5 Listening to Parents

7 Key Findings

8 Parent Report Card

8 *Enrollment*

10 *Parent Satisfaction with Program Effectiveness*

11 *Hours of Care*

12 *Parent Participation*

15 *Child Comfort*

16 *Parent Recommendations*

16 Moving Forward

18 Appendix: Questionnaire

Executive Summary

New York State's Universal Prekindergarten (UPK) legislation, passed in 1997, launched a vital and dynamic new education initiative calling for early education for every four-year-old, to be offered for 2½ hours per day for the duration of the school year. Although funding has not kept pace with the promise of full implementation within five years, the program offers early education opportunities to more than 55,000 children statewide. This makes New York a national leader in providing early education to its youngest children. The New York City public schools embraced this program and made it a reality for 39,000 city children this past year. The program has built new and important partnerships between the public schools and other early childhood programs in the community, making Universal Prekindergarten available in settings appropriate for young children as well as affording full-day options to working families.

What We Did

This Parent Report Card represents the first citywide effort to hear directly from families how well they think the UPK program is succeeding. Over 7,500 parents shared their first-hand experiences of the program in response to a questionnaire distributed by Community School Districts to schools and Community Based Organizations offering UPK services. The parents were asked for their assessments of the enrollment process and their opportunities for direct involvement in the learning process, as well as their opinions of how well the program helped prepare their children for school. The questionnaire was designed with input from the staff and UPK Advisory Board of Community School District 11, The Office of Early Childhood Education, the Early Childhood Strategic Group (ECSG), and the Center for Early Care and Education. The ECSG provided overall coordination of the survey effort as part of its ongoing work to expand early leaning. Over one in five of the 34,000 families with children enrolled in the program in school year 2000-2001 responded, representing programs in 24 of the 32 Community School Districts across all five boroughs.

What We Learned

This Report Card reveals that from the parents' perspective, the UPK program is an overwhelming success, effectively preparing children for the school years ahead, as well as involving parents in their children's early learning experiences. Eighty-five percent enrolled their children in Universal Prekindergarten because they wanted to expose them to the educational enrichment offered by the program. In addition:

- 99% of respondents felt the program would prepare their children for kindergarten;
- 96% of respondents described the enrollment process as "easy";
- 99% of respondents said they felt welcomed by their child's program;
- 99% of responding parents said they would recommend the program to other parents.

What Parents Suggest

While most parents expressed satisfaction with program hours, many also called for more extended-day options. Many parents also indicated interest in extending the program to more children. As one parent concluded,

> *"My child has grown up so much. She is very advanced for her age. I feel this is an excellent opportunity for kids to excel."*

Universal Prekindergarten in New York City

New York State's Universal Prekindergarten (UPK) legislation, passed in 1997, launched a vital and dynamic new education initiative calling for early education for every four-year-old, to be offered for 2½ hours per day for the duration of the school year. Although funding has not kept pace with the promise, the program offered early education opportunities to more than 55,000 children statewide in school year 2001-2002, making the state a national leader in providing early education to its youngest children. The New York City public schools embraced this program and made it a reality for 39,000 city children this past year. In school year 2002-2003, 43,000 city children will be enrolled in the program.

The UPK legislation calls for a developmentally appropriate program that meets the social, cognitive, linguistic, emotional, cultural, and physical needs of children. UPK programs must also meet the needs of parents. Special attention is paid to parental involvement and the program's relevance to children's home experiences, as well as to social and educational continuity with the early elementary grades. Enrollment in UPK is optional for parents, with alternatives including half-day, full-day, and extended-day services in a variety of different program settings with a mix of funding sources. The 32 Community School Districts across the city administer the program, and each has substantial decision-making power regarding its operation.

The UPK legislation was designed to foster community-level partnerships between the public schools and existing early care and education programs. The legislation mandates that a minimum of 10% of services be offered outside public school settings. New York City has far exceeded this mandate, with over 550 Community Based Organizations (CBOs) offering UPK in school year 2001-2002 and an additional 100 agencies expected to begin programs in 2002-2003. Collaboration between the public schools and community-based child care, Head Start, and preschool special education programs has allowed the city to serve more children in appropriate settings; to improve the quality and extend the service hours of existing programs; and to offer more full-day options to working families. Through these partnerships, New York City has taken an important step toward a unified, high-quality early childhood education system. The UPK experience has been similar across the state.

Listening to Parents

This Parents' Report Card represents the first citywide effort to hear directly from families how well the program is meeting its goals of preparing children to enter school and meeting the needs of working parents.

The UPK program in New York City has engaged parents at every stage of its implementation. In 1998, when the program was first planned, Community School Districts (CSDs) convened UPK Advisory Boards representing all constituencies, including parents. Many districts conducted parent surveys before implementing UPK to determine parent needs and their preferences regarding hours, locations, and curricula. At a 1999 citywide UPK forum sponsored by the Early Childhood Strategic Group (ECSG), UPK Advisory Board members recommended that programs work to:

- Accommodate parents' schedules;
- Begin a dialogue about early childhood education; and
- Provide parents with clear, written information about the early childhood curriculum.

Across the state, researchers have noted that the school districts' on-going Advisory Board process has more systematically and fully included parents in the planning and implementation of the classroom program.[1]

The findings presented here were compiled and analyzed by the ECSG from English and Spanish-language questionnaires distributed by the public schools, through its Community School Districts, to families of the 34,000 children enrolled in Universal Prekindergarten in school-year 2000-2001. The questionnaire was designed with input from the staff and UPK Advisory Board of Community School District 11, The Office of Early Childhood Education, the Early Childhood Strategic Group (ECSG), and the Center for Early Care and Education. The ECSG provided overall coordination of the survey effort as part of its ongoing work to expand early learning. The questionnaire provided a vehicle for parents to share their first-

[1] Hicks, Susan, et. al. *Promising Practices: New York State Universal Prekindergarten.* The Cornell Early Childhood Program, June 1999, p. 5.

hand experiences of the program, including their assessments of the enrollment process, their opportunities for direct involvement in the learning process, and their opinions of how well the program prepared their children for school.

Over one-fifth of the families with children in the New York City UPK program responded, or some 7,691 parents. These families represented 24 of the 32 Community School Districts[2] and all five boroughs. A little over half—or 57%—of responding families' children were served in Community-Based Organizations (CBOs), with the remaining 43% served in local public schools (see Figure 1, below). Given the limitation of resources, the questionnaire could not fully capture the voices of parents whose children speak many languages other than English and Spanish. Inclusion of these voices should be a focus of future efforts. Total response rate varied by question, and is reflected below in the "n" number cited above each figure.

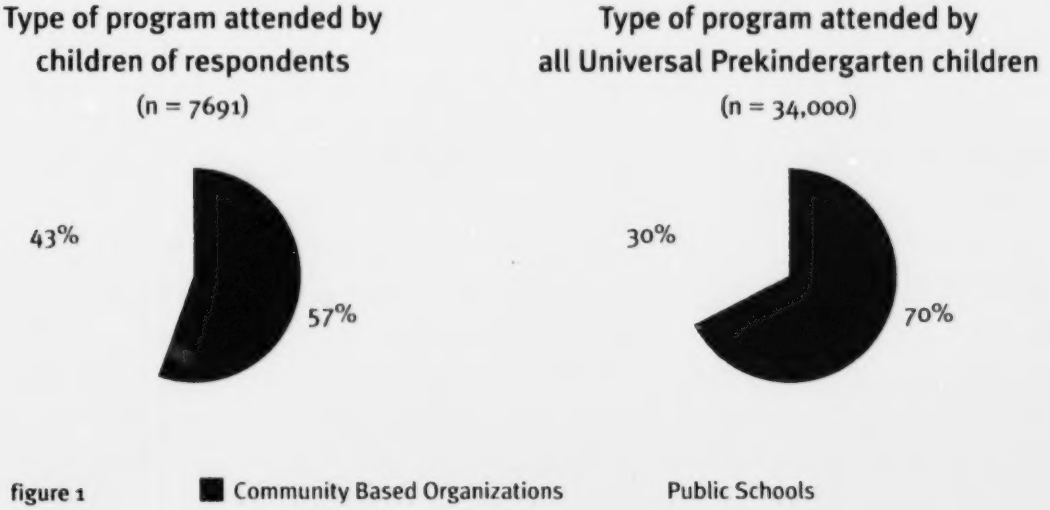

figure 1

[2] Districts 7 (in the Bronx); 14, 16, 18, 19 (in Brooklyn); and 25, 29, and 30 (in Queens) did not respond.

Key Findings

The questionnaire revealed that from the parents' perspective, the Universal Prekindergarten program is an overwhelming success in both aspects of its mission, effectively preparing children for the school years ahead as well as involving parents in their children's early learning experiences. Eighty-five percent of respondents enrolled their children in Universal Prekindergarten because they wanted to expose them to the educational enrichment offered by the program. In addition:

- 99% of respondents felt the program would prepare their children for kindergarten;
- 96% of respondents described the enrollment process as "easy";
- 99% of respondents said they felt welcomed by their children's programs;
- 99% of responding parents said they would recommend the program to other parents.

While most parents expressed satisfaction with program hours, many also called for more extended-day options. Many parents also indicated interest in extending the program to more children. These results demonstrate UPK families' positive perceptions of the program's tremendous accomplishments across the city. As one District 4 parent wrote, *"[UPK] helps [children] develop emotionally, mentally [and] most importantly socially. You do your child an injustice when you hold them back from PreK."* Another parent from District 28 wrote,

> *"The teachers are fantastic, they are caring, loving and attentive to the children. My son learns a lot and loves the crafts they do and the songs they sing. I can go in. It's a wonderful program."*

Parent Report Card

Enrollment

Families of UPK children were asked how they heard about the program, their reasons for enrolling their children in the UPK program, and whether their experiences of the enrollment process were positive or negative. Three main sources alerted parents to the UPK program (Figure 2): local school referrals (36% of respondents), parent referrals (32%) and word of mouth (28%) all played a key role in parents' discovery of the program. Newspapers and community agencies, on the other hand, consistently played a smaller role (at 5% each).

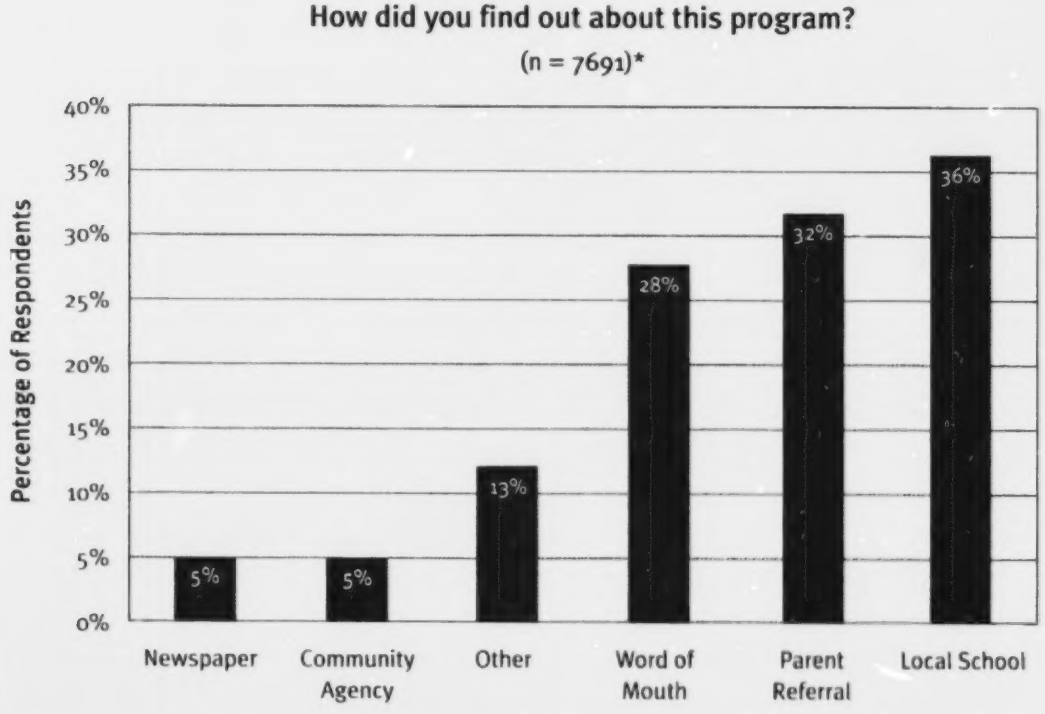

figure 2 *Note: *Some parents chose more than one response. Categories total over 100%*

Parents also were asked to indicate why they enrolled their children in a UPK program. Many parents selected more than one reason for enrollment (Figure 3). Most parents enrolled their children for educational enrichment (85%) and socialization (60%). Only 23% of respondents reported choosing UPK for purposes of child care. This may reflect the availability of mostly part-day UPK settings, and also demonstrates parents' positive assessment of the enrichment offered by UPK.

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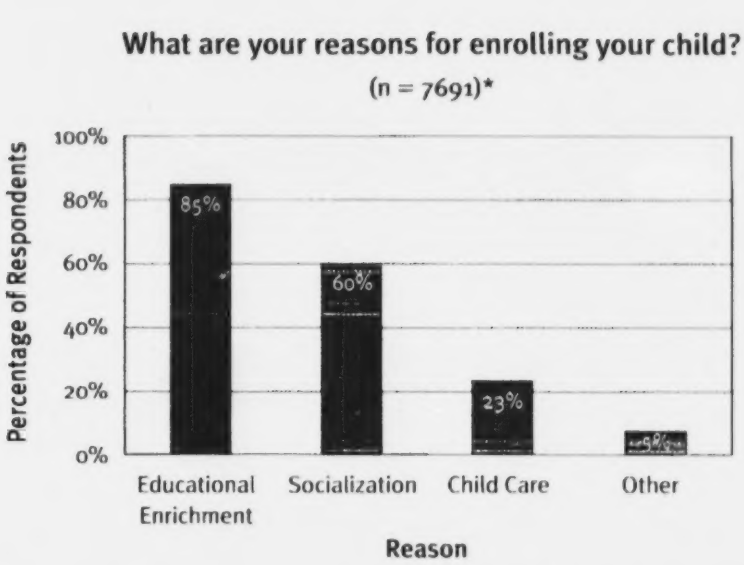

*Note: *Some parents chose more than one response. Categories total over 100%*

figure 3

Finally, parents were asked to characterize the enrollment process as "easy" or "hard." Planners had sought to make the program as user-friendly as possible, and children in UPK are enrolled as public school students regardless of whether their program is located in public school or in an early childhood program in the community. The vast majority—96%—of parents described the enrollment process as "easy" (Figure 4).

figure 4

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Parent Satisfaction with Program Effectiveness

Families were asked to report whether they thought their children had the opportunity to engage in a variety of activities at UPK, and were asked if they felt that the program would prepare their children for the transition to kindergarten. Again, responses were overwhelmingly positive. Ninety-four percent of respondents reported that their children had the opportunity to engage in a variety of activities in the UPK program (Figure 5). Some of the many activities parents reported included: field trips to cultural attractions; science activities; English as a Second Language instruction; physical education and motor skills; cooking; crafts; computer skills; reading, writing, and math skills; and visual and performing arts.

Does your child have the opportunity to engage in a variety of activities?

(n = 6719)

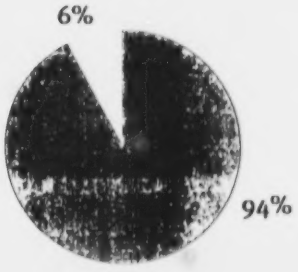

figure 5

When asked if the UPK Program would prepare their children for the transition to kindergarten, ninety-nine percent of respondents reported that it would (Figure 6). According to one District 19 parent, "*My child has grown up so much. She is very advanced for her age. I feel this is an excellent opportunity for kids to excel.*"

Will this program prepare your child for transition to kindergarten?

(n = 7217)

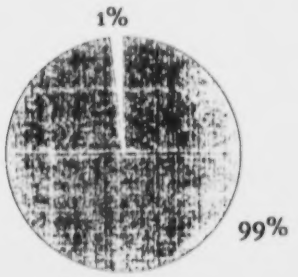

figure 6

Hours of Care

Parents were asked to report the type of program in which they enrolled their children—half-day (fewer than four hours), full-day (four to six hours), or extended-day (more than 6 hours)—as well as whether those hours met their needs. As is reflected in Figure 7, below, most parents had access only to half-day care.

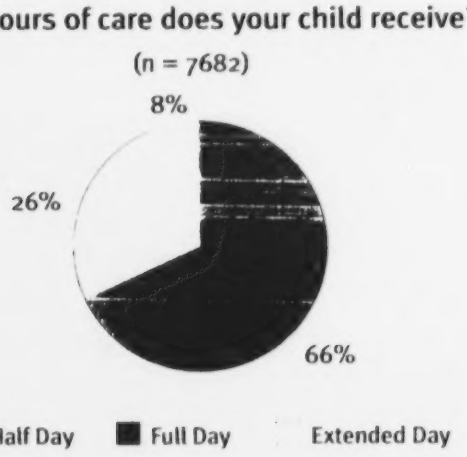

figure 7

As a result of blended funding strategies (described more fully in other ECSG reports), some parents, particularly those served by CBOs, did report having access to full-day and extended-day care. In fact, the proportion of children served by CBOs increases significantly as the hours of care extend past the half-day funded by state legislation (Figure 8). Ninety-four percent of the respondents' children who were served in extended-day programs attended UPK in a CBO setting.

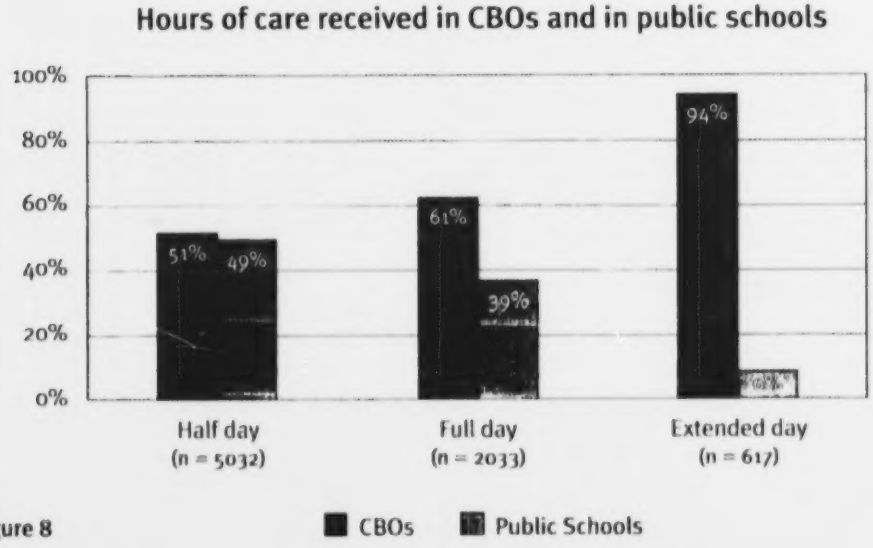

figure 8

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Most parents (87%) reported that the hours of care received by their children did meet their needs, as is reflected in Figure 9, below. As one District 19 parent noted, "*This program has accommodated my needs as a working mother.*" This positive report must be tempered, however, by the knowledge that parents needing full-day care for their children would not have chosen to enroll them in a half-day program. When asked to suggest improvements to the program, many parents called for expanded hours (see Figure 18).

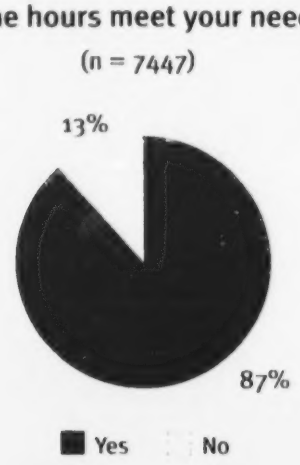

figure 9

Parent Participation

When asked about their involvement in their children's UPK programs, parents reported feeling welcomed, included and well informed. Ninety-six percent of respondents reported that the program providers worked with them to maintain regular, ongoing, two-way communication (Figure 10).

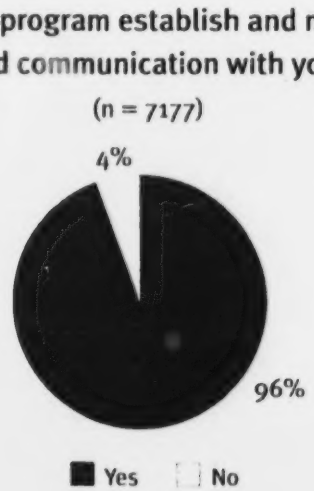

figure 10

The most commonly cited vehicles for parent-teacher communication were parent-teacher conferences (reported by 93% of respondents). Also common were parent orientation meetings (85%) and newsletters (71%; Figure 11).

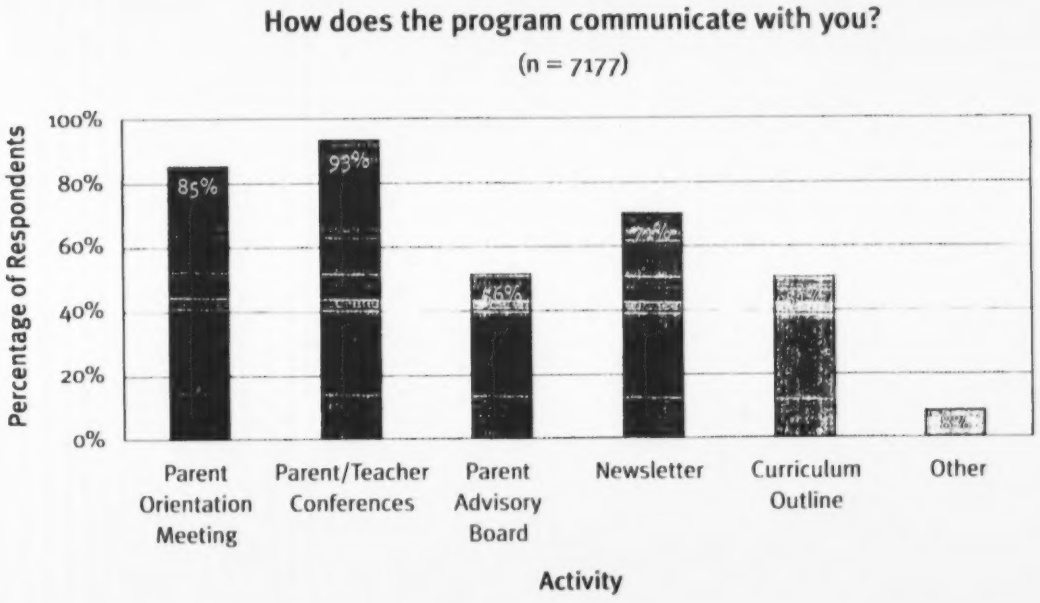

figure 11

Ninety-six percent of parents also reported that there were opportunities for them to participate directly in UPK activities and to visit the classroom (Figure 12).

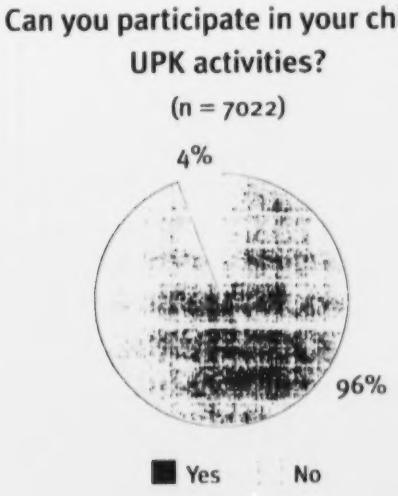

figure 12

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Parents reported a number of different opportunities to participate in their children's learning experiences (Figure 13). These included field trips, parties, meetings, meals and snacks, and volunteer opportunities. The most common means of participation were parties in the classroom (79% of respondents). Other common opportunities included field trips (75%) and meetings (72%).

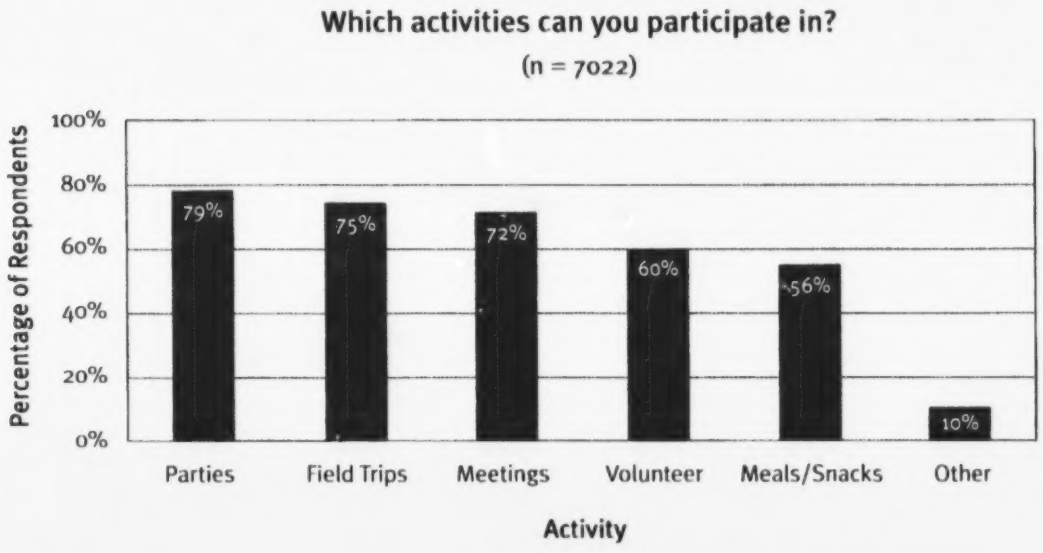

figure 13

Regardless of the setting, parents felt welcomed into the program. Ninety-nine percent of parents reported feeling welcome at their children's Universal Prekindergarten programs (Figure 14).

figure 14

Child Comfort

Parents' positive assessments of the UPK program included their children's adjustment to and comfort in the classroom. Ninety-six percent of parents reported that the program had a plan in place for helping new children feel comfortable (Figure 15).

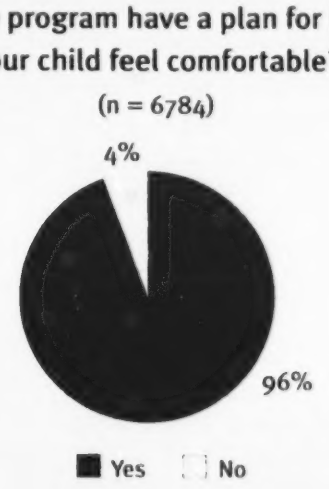

figure 15

When asked to identify the ways in which children were welcomed into the classroom, parents' responses indicated that programs use multiple strategies (Figure 16). Ninety-eight percent of parents named orientation meetings as a way the program had transitioned their children into UPK. Ninety percent reported that the program offered an opportunity for parent and child to visit the program site before enrollment. Eighty-eight percent reported that the program activities included a gradual transition for new children to become accustomed to the school day.

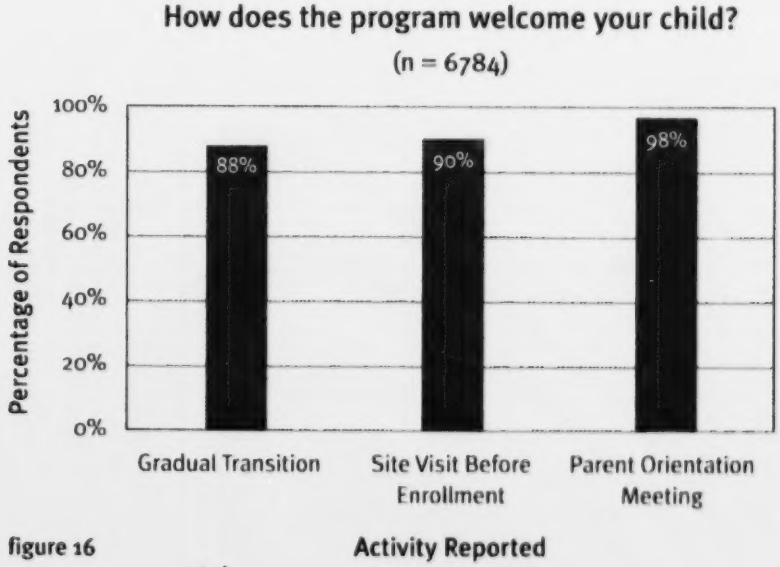

figure 16

Parent Recommendations

The questionnaire demonstrated that the vast majority of responding parents shared positive views of the UPK program. One District 10 parent reported, *"The reason I will tell others [of the program] is my child is well taken care of and she learns a lot from school."* Ninety-nine percent of respondents agreed (Figure 17), reporting that they would recommend the program to other parents.

Would you recommend this program to other families?

(n = 7495)

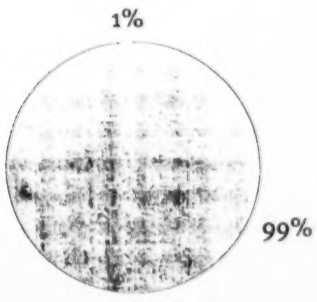

figure 17

Moving Forward

The responses to the UPK questionnaire by more than 7,500 city parents document how strongly parents feel about the importance of the UPK program for their children. It also provides evidence that programs are implementing successful strategies to engage parents and involve them as partners in the education of their children. These findings indicate that the program has a strong foundation on which to build, but also suggest that it can continue to improve by both expanding and deepening its offerings.

Parents' feedback illuminates their own priorities for improvement. While the 32 Community School Districts have significant flexibility in administering the UPK program, and differ administratively in many ways, parents' suggestions for improvement showed surprising similarity across the 24 Districts reporting (Figure 18). Parents in 18 Districts called for more extended hours, the most common suggestion across the city. Parents in 15 Districts asked that programs put more emphasis on simple homework, like math and writing. Finally, parents in eight Districts recommended that the UPK program expand bilingual services.

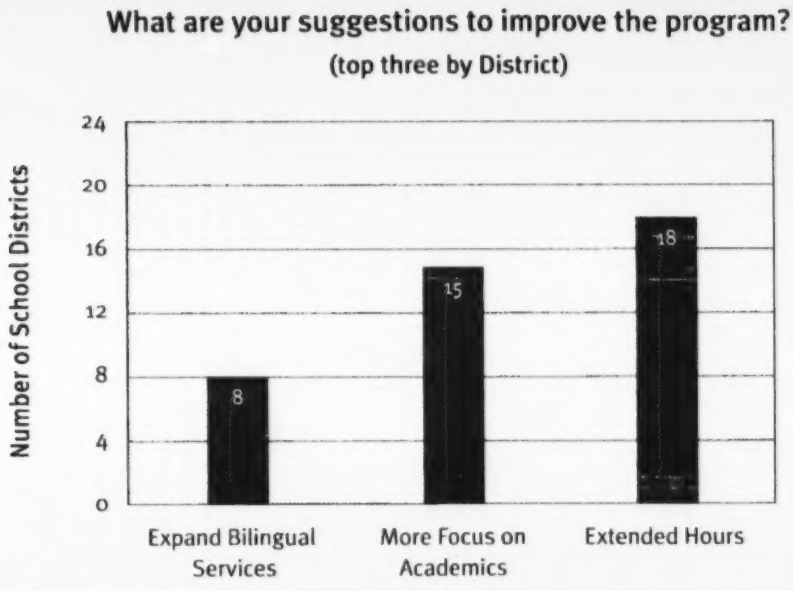

figure 18

In addition to parent feedback, there is much to learn about improving the city's UPK program from planning and implementation of the program statewide. In 1999 The Cornell University Early Childhood Program reviewed UPK plans across the state to identify promising practices, including approaches to parent involvement.[3] One strategy receiving special note is a plan to offer parents home learning kits and activities throughout the year. Another is to make resource rooms and libraries easily accessible to parents. A third utilizes mentoring strategies and parent support groups as a resource to parents in setting their own goals. While it is clear that the city's UPK program is both satisfying parents and engaging them, the above strategies offer new opportunities for growth.

Finally, it is essential that parents' voices continue to be heard and integrated in the ongoing expansion of the UPK program. Those working to implement UPK should feel encouraged by families' overwhelmingly positive assessments of the program. As this report confirms, families have a strong interest in even greater development of the UPK program, as well as important ideas about how the city can continue to build upon its impressive successes to date.

[3] Hicks, Susan, et. al. *Promising Practices: New York State Universal Prekindergarten.* The Cornell Early Childhood Program, June 1999.

Universal Pre-k Parent Questionnaire

Community School District: _____

School or Program Name: _____

1. Is your child enrolled in a: ☐ Half day program ☐ Full day program ☐ Extended day program
2. Do the hours meet your needs? ☐ Yes ☐ No
3. Do you feel welcome as a parent? ☐ Yes ☐ No
   Explain: _____
4. Would you recommend this program to other families? ☐ Yes ☐ No
5. Was the enrollment process: ☐ Easy ☐ Difficult
   If difficult, why? _____
6. Does the UPK program have a Parent Handbook? ☐ Yes ☐ No
7. Does the program have a plan for helping new children feel comfortable? ☐ Yes ☐ No

   Does the program include:

   a. Site visit before enrollment? ☐ Yes ☐ No
   b. A Parent orientation meeting? ☐ Yes ☐ No
   c. Gradual transition for new children into school day? ☐ Yes ☐ No
8. Does the program work with parents to establish and maintain regular, ongoing, two-way communication? ☐ Yes ☐ No

   Does the program include any of the following? (Please check):

   ☐ Parent Orientation Meeting ☐ Newsletters
   ☐ Parent/Teacher Conferences ☐ Curriculum Outline
   ☐ PTA or Parent Advisory Board ☐ Other _____
9. Are there opportunities for you to participate in activities and visit the classroom? ☐ Yes ☐ No
   Do these activities include: ☐ Field Trips ☐ Parties ☐ Meals/Snacks ☐ Volunteer/Opportunities
   ☐ Other _____

10. Does the program provide the following services:

    a. Bilingual Resources ☐ Yes ☐ No
    b. Special Education Resources ☐ Yes ☐ No
    c. Social Worker ☐ Yes ☐ No
    d. Nurse/Health Clinic ☐ Yes ☐ No
    e. Parenting Workshops ☐ Yes ☐ No
    f. Information on Kindergarten transition ☐ Yes ☐ No
    g. Enrichment programs (i.e. music specialist, dance specialist, science, etc.) ☐ Yes ☐ No

11. Does your child have the opportunity to engage in a variety of activities? ☐ Yes ☐ No

    Explain: _____

12. Do you feel that the program will prepare your child to transition into kindergarten? ☐ Yes ☐ No

13. How did you find out about this program? (Please check):

    ☐ Parent referral ☐ Word of Mouth ☐ Newspaper
    ☐ Local School ☐ Community Agency ☐ Other _____

14. What are your reasons for enrolling your child in a UPK program? (Please check):

    ☐ Educational enrichment ☐ Child Care
    ☐ Socialization ☐ Other _____

15. Do you have any suggestions to improve the program? ☐ Yes ☐ No

    Please share your ideas: _____

    _____

    _____

16. How often do you read to your child? (Please check):

    ☐ Five times a week? ☐ More than five times a week? ☐ Less than five times a week?

17. Are you involved in any other learning activities with your child outside of the UPK program? ☐ Yes ☐ No

    Please describe these learning activities? _____

    _____

Thank you for sharing your thoughts and ideas about UPK.

The Early Childhood Strategic Group

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Child Care Action Campaign
Child Care Council at CUNY
Child Care, Inc.
Children's Aid Society
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National Black Child Development Institute
New Visions for Public Schools
Susan Wagner Day Schools
UJA Federation – New York
United Neighborhood Houses

The Center for Early Care and Education

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